

## Tickets to Clarksville

Patsy, Laura, and Jean found it hard to keep up with their mother's brisk pace after they crossed Joseph Campau and began the walk down Halleck Street toward home. The midday sun beat down on them. Wet circles grew larger on their dresses under the arms. The girls started dripping sweat down the sides of their temples and down their necks. The more they sweated, the more Patsy could catch the scent of their mother's perfume they'd put on that morning.

May Ford carried a sleeping Annie in her left arm, resting the child against her hip, her small head lying on May's shoulder, and a large packet wrapped in brown paper and tied with string in the other arm. "Hurry along, girls, and keep up," their mother said as they approached Maine Street. They still had three long blocks to walk to make it home.

Patsy grabbed her sisters' hands and pulled them forward. "Let's go," she said.

"M-m-m-mama . . . I'm tired. It's hot," Jean whined, pulling back. Patsy gave her arm a mild yank as she pulled them ahead.

"Why do we have to go to Clarksville?" Laura asked.

"I just want to make sure your grandma and your aunts are all right," she answered. "They say everything's fine, but I want to see for myself. They had a flood down there last winter. The Cumberland River that flows past town seems to flood every ten years or so. But this flood was bad, worse than most folks can remember—the water rose to over sixty feet."

Laura gasped.

"I d-d-d . . ." Jean tried to get the words out.

"She doesn't wanna go," Laura interrupted.

"Laura, goodness knows, let your sister speak for herself," their mother said.

"But she can't."

"She can if you just let her."

Annie May popped her head up and looked around. "Good," their mother said. "I can put you down now." She stood the youngest on

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her feet and then smoothed out both of their dresses.

“I wanna see the fud, mama. What’s the fud?” Annie May asked.

“It’s flood, baby. Flood. That’s when the water from the river comes over onto the dry land. And you won’t be seeing it. It’s all gone now. Been gone a long time,” she said as she took Annie’s hand and continued the walk home. She stepped at a slower pace now.

Patsy looked up at the street sign—MacKay—when they got to the corner. “Two more blocks to home,” she said out loud.

By the time they reached the next street, Arlington, their mother’s pace had slowed even more. Yet, Patsy still had to pull her sisters to help them keep up. “Stop pulling! Mama, Patsy’s pulling my arm,” Laura said.

“Keep up now, girls,” the mother replied.

As they approached Goddard, Patsy could hear the muffled *hee-haw* sound of their father’s saw. “Hear Daddy’s saw? Almost home,” she said to Jean and Laura. They crossed the street. Patsy noticed their mother picked up her pace as they approached the second house off the

corner; it was the Williamses' place. She tugged her sisters along.

Again, Laura said to Patsy, "Stop pu—"

"Shhh!" May turned her head and shushed the girl.

There was yelling—a man and a woman. Patsy recognized the man's voice: it was Mr. Williams. She couldn't tell if the woman was Mrs. Williams or not. And she couldn't make out what they were saying. "Lord have mercy," their mother muttered as they hurried past the house. "Keep going, girls. Keep your eyes straight ahead," their mother said. Neither Patsy nor her sisters looked over at the Williamses' house. The man's voice got louder. It sounded like the woman was crying. There was the sound of glass breaking. The woman screamed . . . then there was silence.

May picked up Annie, and she and the girls hurried down the street. The sound of the *hee-haw* from their father's saw was loud and clear now. When they reached the Chambers' house, the house next door, their dog Pointo met them at the driveway and started barking. They were home.

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“Don’t move ’til I say so. I don’t want to stick you with one of these pins,” May Ford cautioned Patsy as she pinned the pleats in place around her waist and adjusted the fabric over the dress she still had on underneath. During the trip downtown to Haley’s department store earlier that day, she let the older girls pick out their own fabric: Patsy wanted a sky-blue cotton organdy. Laura chose a pink handkerchief linen that their mother liked so much she bought an extra yard for Annie’s dress. Jean had announced on the streetcar that she wanted a yellow dress made out of dotted Swiss. They scoured the entire third floor until their mother finally found it. Up against the wall in a corner, May noticed a bolt of fabric with small white raised dots on yellow batiste: the dotted Swiss fabric.

Now at home, there was fabric laid out all over the dining room—on the table, on the floor, draped across chairs. May sat at the treadle sewing machine and Patsy stood next to her. “Turn a little this way,” she said, moving Patsy to the right.

“When are you going to start my dress?” Laura called out from the piano in the living room. It was an upright model that Douglas Ford had bought from a customer a few years back. Laura was seated on the bench, practicing her scales. Annie was perched beside her.

“You’re next,” their mother answered. “Just hold your horses. Keep practicing your scales—you girls have your piano lessons this evening. I’ll be ready for you in no time.”

Annie May started banging on the piano keys. “I’m playing scales, too, Mama,” she announced.

“Mama, make her stop!” Laura pleaded while finishing a run of notes.

“She can practice, too,” May said. “She’ll start her lessons before you know it. Let her make music with you.”

“But it doesn’t sound like mu—”

“Hush now!” their mother said, cutting her off.

Patsy winced as May took the pleated organdy from around her middle. One of the pins had indeed stuck her. “Sorry, baby,” their mother said as she picked up a needle and thread and, with long running stitches, began basting the

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skirt to the top of the dress. Patsy sat down at the dining room table. She was making a dress, too, but not at the sewing machine. She was hand-stitching a dress for Annie May's doll, using scraps of organdy left over from her own dress. Annie came over from the piano and stood next to Patsy, watching as she took up her needle and thread. In no time, she had sewn the front and back bodice pieces together. She was starting to sew the top of the dress to the skirt when May called Patsy over to her.

"Are you ready for one more fitting?" May asked as she turned to Patsy.

Patsy smiled. "Yes, Mama," she said. She put down the unfinished doll's dress to go stand by her mother.

Annie May whined, "No, Patsy! Finish the dress for my dolly!"

"Annie, stop whining! She'll finish the dress before we leave for Clarksville. She's almost finished now," May said.

May took a piece of tailor's chalk and marked the hem on Patsy's dress and then marked where the buttonholes would be hand-sewn along the back. She even pinned on a satin

ribbon sash that would be tied in a bow under the back buttons. Patsy did not have to look in a mirror to know that the dress fit her perfectly. She could tell by the way it hung from her shoulders and then billowed out in full pleats from her waist to a few inches below her knees.

There was not much breeze coming in through the dining room window as May hovered over the sewing machine. Every few minutes, she stopped to fan herself with the paper she had sketched the girls' dresses on. Patsy intently watched her put the final stitches on the dress. Her mother's foot, firmly resting on the wide, wrought-iron foot pedal, pushed down first toe then heel—back and forth—until she had a steady rocking rhythm going. Patsy saw the tense look on her mother's face: it was hard work pressing the treadle that moved the belt and turned the wheel, pushing the needle in and out of the fabric.

Several minutes later the sewing machine stopped. May cut the thread and held up the dress.

“Ahh!” Laura gasped. She jumped up from the piano and ran into the dining room. “Mama, I

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want one just like that,” she said standing next to the outfit.

“Uh-uh, you get your own,” Patsy answered.

“But, I—”

“That’s enough, girls,” their mother said. She held up a drawing.

“Here’s what your dress will look like, Laura.”

She pointed to a loose sheath with a ruffle at the hem and around the neck. Annie’s was the same except her dress had a gathered skirt at the waist.

“M-m-m-mama, how do you sew so fast?” Jean asked.

Patsy looked behind her. Jean had been standing quietly and watching from the other side of the room, in the doorway to her parents’ bedroom.

“Honey, I’ve told you, before,” she answered, “I was one piece away from getting my diploma at Tennessee State University and my teaching certificate in home economics when I married your father. There’s not much I didn’t learn about sewing, crocheting, embroidery . . .” Her voice trailed off. Then she repeated herself, “One piece away.” She looked at Patsy, Laura,

then Jean and said, "Let that be a lesson to you girls: always finish what you start!"

"But you were a teacher in Clarksville, Mama," Patsy said. "You said you were one of the teachers at the colored school."

"I was the *only* teacher, baby. It was a one-room schoolhouse for the colored children in town. They let me teach, all right. But that doesn't change the fact that I didn't have my certificate. I couldn't teach up here once I married your father and came to Detroit. No, the lesson's the same, and you girls remember it—finish what you start."

"May!" Douglas Ford strode in through the kitchen. "I'm gonna get those tickets now. Where're my girls? Who's ready to go with me to the train station?"

Annie May and Jean ran up to him. He grabbed them both and lifted them in his arms.

"I'm ready, Daddy!" Patsy answered.

"Me too! Can I go, Mama?" Laura asked.

"No, baby, I need you here to fit this dress," May said to Laura. She plopped down on the floor and pouted.

"You'll get to the train station soon enough,"

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their mother said. Then, turning to Patsy, she added, "Go on now. You go on with your father and get some good seats for us."

"Oh, and Douglas, the girls have their piano lessons this evening. So don't stay too long," May said to her husband as he turned to leave through the kitchen.

"Right before the trip?" he asked without looking back.

"They need their lessons. Patsy has to be ready to play this fall when Sunday school starts up again. Anyway, Mrs. Lewis enjoys seeing the girls . . ."

"That's because they're her only students," he murmured as he walked out the back door, Patsy right behind him.



*Train leaving for Chicago now boarding at track number 19.*

In the background, the announcement bellowed over the public address system in the Michigan Central Station. Someone bumped up against Patsy as she almost ran to keep up with her father's long strides. He moved quickly

and deliberately through the crowd in the train station.

“Daddy, don’t walk so fast,” she pleaded.

“You’ve got to keep moving in this kind of crowd,” he said. “Otherwise you’ll never get through. Come on, now.” He grabbed her gloved hand and kept moving.

*Last call for train stopping in Toledo, Cincinnati, Louisville, Clarksville, and Nashville. Boarding at track number 23. All aboard!*

“Clarksville, Daddy! Is that our train?” she asked, almost yelling to be heard over the crowd.

“Yes, baby. That’s it. All the way down to Clarksville, Tennessee . . .”

Patsy looked around the station. It was the biggest building she could remember ever being in: rows of tall, wide marble columns two stories high. Shiny marble floors. Long wooden benches in the main waiting room, longer than the pews at church and crowded with people and their suitcases. There was a gift shop, a shoeshine parlor, a florist stand. She looked straight ahead beneath a gigantic brass clock—the windows of the ticket offices.

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“Look Daddy! Over there—that’s where we buy the tickets!” She pointed.

“Mmm-hmm,” he said.

Patsy started walking toward the ticket counters, but her father pulled her in a different direction.

“Daddy, it’s over there.”

“I see where it is, child. Come with me.”

Patsy followed her father past the newsstand, a drugstore, and a barbershop.

*Express train to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, now boarding on track number 7. Last call for Chicago, track number 19. All aboard!*

“Where’re we going, Daddy?”

Douglas Ford didn’t say a word. He held her hand as they weaved through the crowd. When they turned a final corner, Patsy knew right away where her father had taken her. Directly ahead of them was a huge lunch counter and soda fountain, with tall cushioned stools and a gleaming marble countertop.

“Daddy!” she shrieked.

“I promised you a strawberry soda now, didn’t I?” he asked.

And he had, in the hottest part of the

afternoon, as he drove them to the train station in one of the Ford Model A pickup trucks he used in his business.

Wearing the same white gloves and dress she had worn downtown that morning, Patsy wiped the sweat off of her forehead with the back of her hand.

Her father looked over at her in the passenger's seat and said, "A nice cold strawberry soda would taste pretty good right now."

"Sure would," Patsy answered.

"Then I think that's what we'll have—there's a soda fountain at the train station . . ."

*Pullman car bound for New York City now boarding on track 5.*

Before Patsy could step onto the footrail under the counter and pull herself up onto the stool, her father had swooped her up in his arms, lifted her gently, and placed her on the leather-cushioned stool.

"Whoa!" She giggled.

"There, how's that?" he asked.

"Thanks, Daddy."

As Patsy straightened and arranged the

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skirt of her dress over the stool and folded her gloves neatly on her lap, her father ordered two strawberry sodas “with extra whipped cream.”

The bright-pink sodas were the biggest Patsy had ever seen. As she dipped her spoon in deep, a bit of the ice cream and whipped cream spilled over the tall glass and onto the counter.

“Don’t worry about that little mess,” her father said. “Just take your time. Enjoy your soda and cool off.”



*Last call for Pittsburgh on track number 7. All aboard!*

Patsy and her father had finished their treats and now they stood at the ticket window, directly under the big brass clock.

“Five first-class tickets to Clarksville, Tennessee, please, departing Wednesday, July 14, returning Wednesday, July 21,” Douglas Ford said. “Morning departure,” he added.

The clerk looked over at Patsy and then up at her father. He peered over the rim of his glasses and said, “You know you’ll have to change trains at the Cincinnati station.”

“I know the protocol,” her father answered.  
“Cincinnati? Why Cincinnati?” Patsy asked him.

“You still want first-class tickets?” the clerk asked.

“Yes,” Douglas answered curtly.

The clerk shook his head and then handed him the five tickets. “No morning departures that day. The earliest departure is at 2:05 p.m.”

Her father paid the clerk. As they turned and walked away, Patsy asked him, “Why are we changing trains in Cincinnati? Is it a special train?”

“Honey—,” he started to say something and abruptly stopped speaking. Then he finished the sentence. “It’s a long ride to Clarksville, child,” he said, “a long ride.”